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# Public Perception: Heritage Building Conservation in Kuala Lumpur

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## Abstract

Malaysia had initiated the effort of conserving heritage buildings just approximately 30 to 40 years ago. The awareness is slowly increasing; though it is rather slow. Extra efforts on conserving these buildings can bring immense benefits to the country especially for future generation. However, whether those buildings are important to be conserved is always a question asked by many. Is Malaysian aware on the withstanding of those buildings at present, and is it important to them? This paper aims to review Malaysian public's perception on heritage buildings conservation besides identifying their physical accessibility to those buildings in Kuala Lumpur.

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**Keywords:** Heritage building; conservation; Malaysian public; awareness

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## 1. Introduction

Heritage building conservation in Malaysia is still at its infancy (Mohd Isa et al, 2011). However the effort to preserve and conserve has started a few decades ago, but only within the last decade the efforts have seen tremendous achievement. This can only be witnessed through the establishment of National Heritage Department in 2006 and also the enforcement of the National Heritage Act 2005 (Harun, 2011).

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Again, the listing of Penang and Melaka as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 has put Malaysia in the heritage tourism map. It is believed that the government has played its vital roles to ensure the legislation is in its place and enforcement is being carried out thoroughly by its agents. But how serious are we taking this effort to a greater height, which may involve the Malaysian public at large? Are they aware the importance of preserving the heritage? And how does this implicate them directly or indirectly?

## 2. Literature Review

Most contemporary societies are very keen on the preservation and conservation of their heritage (Grefe, 2004), as heritage satisfies a variety of needs – artistic, earning profits through tourism, aesthetics, recreation, creating positive image of the area, and improving the living environment to name a few. Heritage building conservation is no exception, essentially comprises the physical evidence of our environment that symbolizes the tangible cultural identity and heritage of the nation. In the case of Malaysia, it is a means of affirming our national heritage and promoting solidarity thus provides the means of satisfying a wide variety of aspirations. The Malaysian government initiates relevant legislations and enforcements as they play important roles in conservation of heritage buildings to safeguard the spirit and identity of the nation. However, the participation of the people is the utmost anticipation. It is a win-win situation that will benefit both the public and the government directly or indirectly. This concerted effort, being supported by various stakeholders – the building owner, the professional and competent technical personnel may promise the bright prospect of the heritage building conservation efforts in Malaysia.

Grefe (2004) again stressed that the public awareness of preserving the heritage is largely based on the changes of social and economic environment. Two main issues concerning the public of the preserving the built environment heritage are the creating of new jobs and the need to maintain the novelty of products.

Our immediate neighbour, Singapore was facing this dilemma in the 70's (Sim, 1996) as the restructuring of the economic of the island state resulted in rapid growth and a huge demand for commercial and residential spaces. However, the national planning authority, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) revealed its Conservation Master Plan in 1986. Under this Master Plan, the historic shophouses in three major areas, which are the main heritage commercial building typology, were to be conserved and given a new lease of life. This has shown the combination of the authority's intervention and the people's participation was very much needed in preserving the heritage in the face of rapid urbanization. The URA sets the physical framework for the private sector to be actively involved in conserving the Singapore's heritage. The 3 areas – Chinatown, Little India and Kampung Glam are nowadays a successful story of conservation efforts, teeming with activities and become major tourist destinations in the city-state. This gratifying story also can be attributed to the URA's policy of encouraging the public to preserve and conserve the national heritage. In the end, it is the roles of the authority and participation of the public that determine the success of the heritage building conservation efforts.

Apparently, there is an obvious link between the success story of Singapore models and the observation of Grefe (2006). Let's have a sneak preview of what is going on in the developed nation, especially in Europe. Godwin (2011) in his paper *Building Conservation and Sustainability in the United Kingdom*, is discussing even beyond the key issue of conservation. The people in the United Kingdom have already embraced the heritage building preservation and conservation efforts whole-heartedly as they are seen as the embodiment of the story of the nation and worth safeguarding for their own sake, regardless of economic value. At this time the sustainability bandwagon or agenda holds the centre ground in the built environment fraternity. Undoubtedly, the people in the United Kingdom are indeed

looking beyond of what we are currently preaching in Malaysia. Despite of this, the commitment to the heritage built environment remains, both legislatively and in the cultural values of the nation. They are already championing the sustainability in building conservation, particularly in the key issue in terms of the reduction of Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions and towards zero carbon footprints. This also reflects in 3 overlapping aspects of sustainability – environmental, economic and social requirements and the need to bring them together harmoniously.

However in the end, Greffe (2006) also stressed that it will be what the values the community and the nation puts upon the heritage of the country that will determine the future of building conservation efforts. In the UK, the past is still treasured, as is the story of the people who made and lived and worked in heritage buildings. This is seen as a concerted effort of the community and public as a whole, not solely shouldered by a handful of conservation personnel.

Now we have two success stories of government policy and public participation in heritage building conservation efforts. Greffe (2006) however warned that the public interest (or disinterest) in a heritage building conservation depends on its initial state of conservation. He highlighted that the very bad state the building is, the public and the stakeholders involved are likely to neglect it. This accelerates the deterioration process of the heritage building. Inversely, the good condition heritage building will draw a positive response and stir up more interest and attention, resulting the increase resources allocated for its conservation.

Harun (2011) also warned in her paper ‘Heritage Building Conservation in Malaysia: Experience and Challenges’ that the heritage building conservation efforts require knowledge and understanding of the resources and the history they represent. Doubled with proper management of resources and a systematic conservation procedure, this effort seems only belonged to a group of specialized people – architects, engineers, historians, archeologists, chemists, environmentalist and other experts, but not the public at large. For further development in this field and the benefit for the nation, she suggested more efforts should be encouraged to involve public in the scene – in terms of promotion, education, awareness and even direct participation.

After all, the government through the implementation of relevant legislations and the authority’s policy play an ultimate duty to encourage public participation to together safeguard the nation’s heritage. In the end, it is vital to understand that heritage building conservation is a finite resource and that in their existence there is not only embodied energy, but also the spirit of the people and identity of the country.

### **3. Methodology**

In this paper, mixed-methods comprising of face to face semi-structured interviews were used with an aid of photographed-supported interviews and structured questionnaire. This method is considered to be the best method of collecting the data required for this research due to gain a random group of public around Kuala Lumpur, both user and non-user of heritage buildings. This method too has an advantage as it may define different opinions and responds from the public of the historic buildings at their own pace and idea.

#### *3.1. Questionnaire Design*

A semi-structured questionnaire was used in surveying the public to gather the primary data. It contains of seven sections with series of both open and closed-ended questions. This paper however will discuss only on 3 different sections of the questionnaire specifically to fulfill the objective of the paper. The first section is to measure respondent’s attitude on the importance of valuing the conservation of heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur. They were to rate their level of importance from a given numerical

scale ranging from 'Not Important' to 'Very Important'. Five reasons were given based on 20 interviews had earlier during the pretest. The second section was when respondents were firstly briefed on the current conservation of heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur, and later asked on their opinion of the current state. Answers ranging from 'Very Bad' to 'Excellent' were presented so as to know their level of awareness on the matter. As to evaluate the visits made by respondents to any heritage buildings, the third section deals with questions on their visits within the last 12 months. This section will indicate whether heritage buildings are regularly visited or not, and why they are visited by the public.

### *3.2. Questionnaire Distribution*

The interviews were held randomly within Kuala Lumpur city in public spaces like Merdeka Square, Petaling Street, Central Market, National Library and some popular spot of shopping malls. Questionnaires were distributed randomly by 'Convenience Survey'. Before questions were asked, the respondents were briefed on the objectives and the purpose of the survey. A questionnaire was administered in a single interview with every respondent. An interviewing session for a respondent took about 30-40 minutes. Due to financial, manpower and time constraints, the subjects for this study included only 178 individuals. They were selected based on non-probability convenience sampling in order to get a broad perspective of population.

The interviews began with two pretest survey held earlier in the field. A pretest is a small-scale survey whereby most of the steps were followed during the big survey. The pretest is an opportunity to make sure everything works the way it is intended, get an idea about the potential response rate, and identifying any potential disasters. The pretest was done twice, according to the survey budget and time consume.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### *4.1. Public's perception*

Malaysian public are often known for their golden heart in charities and donations which give the broad picture of their level of understanding and sensitiveness. It is necessary to distinguish public's perception on heritage building conservation in Kuala Lumpur before they were later enquired on the importance to conserve them. It is an essential pace to verify on the public's basic knowledge on conservation substance and whether they have any interest on the matter. It is a necessary measure as the public themselves will mostly be the initiator for the success of the heritage building conservation efforts later. Public's opinion on why heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur should be conserved is discussed in the first section of the survey.

### *4.2. Importance of Heritage Building Conservation in Kuala Lumpur*

Public's perception on the importance of heritage building conservation in Kuala Lumpur was measured using a five point Likert scale in the first section of the survey. Their answers are to be ranged from "Not Important" to 'Very Important', whereas the unsure respondents could select the option "Neutral". Table 1 shows the level of importance in the conservation of heritage building among the public.

Table 1. Level of importance in the conservation of heritage buildings among Malaysian public; Source: Author

Importance	Not Important	Slightly Important	Neutral	Important	Very Important
a) To protect the scenic beauty of Kuala Lumpur	2%	4%	17%	29%	48%
b) As tourism landmark and attraction	2%	0%	6%	39%	53%
c) To sustain history and narration of the city's existence	4%	5%	29%	41%	21%
d) To document all the past architecture	2%	10%	33%	37%	17%
e) As living evidence for the future generation	3%	8%	28%	32%	29%

During the pretest survey, various reasons have been received from the public when asked on this particular question, but only five reasons are listed then for the final questionnaire as indicated in above table. It is surprisingly to know that most respondents have positive agreement on the importance of conserving heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur where most of them have responded 'Important' and 'Very Important'. It is a positive remark to be considered as this result may point to a high level of awareness from the public on saving heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur.

First and foremost, heritage buildings are said to be important as tourism landmark and attraction in the city of Kuala Lumpur with 53% respondents chose 'Very Important'. Many attempts have been made by the government agencies on promoting Malaysia throughout the world by organizing special events like Visit Malaysia Year, annual Floral Festivals and many more. Advertisements and brochures are distributed on promoting Malaysia as a multi-cultural country with varieties of both tangible and intangible heritage around the country. Not surprisingly, international tourists do still visit Malaysia for not its priceless architectural significance especially those British Colonials buildings throughout the main cities in Malaysia. Besides Kuala Lumpur, the historic city of Georgetown and Melaka for instance has developed over 500 years of trading and cultural exchanges between East and West in the Straits of Malacca. Both cities were listed as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 as both constitute unique architectural and cultural townscape without parallel anywhere in East and Southeast Asia (UNESCO, 2008). Such world recognitions should be appreciated and learnt by governmental bodies and private organizations in upgrading Kuala Lumpur to be at par as those cities.

While 48% of the respondents believe that heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur do function too as to protect the scenic beauty of the swarming city of Kuala Lumpur. Gradually, more steel and concrete developments are replacing the old buildings which are slowly dilapidating if no further actions are taken. According to 41% of respondents, heritage buildings are desired to sustain history and narration of the city's existence. In fact, they too believed that heritage buildings are the living evidence to document all the past architecture for the benefit of the future generation. This is accurate as living buildings are the only physical evidence of the past history besides old books, portraits and writings kept in the archives. A percentage of the respondents where else answered 'Neutral' to the question about the importance of heritage buildings. There are two possibilities whether the respondents are unsure about the actual importance of heritage buildings, or they might just think that averagely. As to compare the 'Neutral' respondent's characteristics with the whole sample, the 'Neutral' respondents do not stand out to any significant degree.

However, referring to Table 1, minimal respondents think that heritage buildings have least importance. This can be clearly seen with the 'Slightly Important' and 'Not Important' percentage of respondents. Other words, it can be seen clearly the difference between those who do believe in the importance of heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur with those who don't. It is a positive start to the research, with the

knowledge that respondents or to be more accurate, the public, are all very encouraging in conserving those precious heritage buildings found throughout the city of Kuala Lumpur. In the second section of the survey, they were then questioned on their knowledge of the current condition of heritage building conservation in Kuala Lumpur.

#### 4.3. Public awareness on the current condition of heritage buildings conservation in Kuala Lumpur

The attitude of the public regarding the current heritage building conservation in Kuala Lumpur is presented in Figure 1. The number of respondents is plotted on the X axis, while the level of characteristics is plotted on the Y axis.

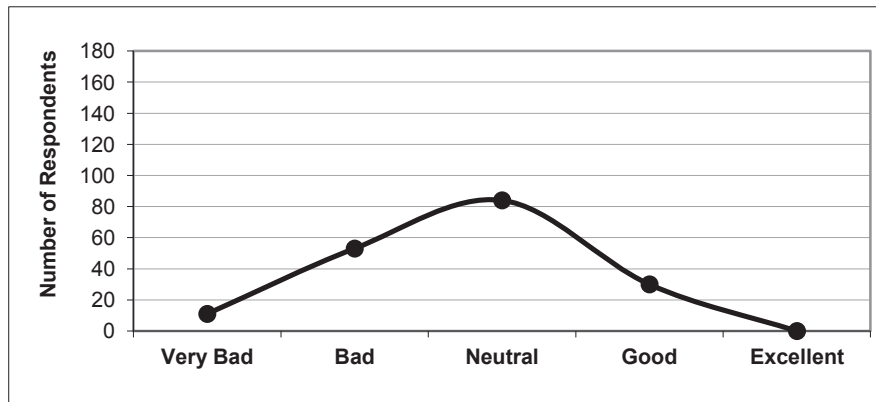


Fig. 1. Public awareness on the current condition of heritage building conservation in Kuala Lumpur; Source: Author

Figure 1 illustrates an interesting picture. Firstly, 84 individuals which are equivalent to 47% of the respondents stated 'Neutral' when they are asked on the current condition of the heritage building conservation in Kuala Lumpur. This result show a regular level of awareness compared to the earlier section. They are two possibilities on this received figure, either the public themselves do not know their preferences well enough on this matter, or they might just think that the current conservation of heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur is on an average level.

Meanwhile 30% of the respondents have made a clear remark on the current condition of heritage building conservation in Kuala Lumpur as 'Bad', which is equivalent to about 53 respondents out of the total number of 178. Only 17% declared as 'Good', and their opinion which the figure reflects is not particularly surprising. In fact, this may be their honest preferences on the existing condition and further step for improvement should be considered.

According to the public, they have heard of the conservation efforts lately throughout a few numbers of resources. Their sources of knowledge are revealed in Figure 2. About 33.1% of the respondents decided their source of knowledge regarding the current condition of conservation efforts in Kuala Lumpur are from the newspaper reading, followed by 23% from the magazines. Most of the respondents agreed that the subject is increasingly published in the headlines of the newspaper lately. This is rather a fact that, the government and many other interested parties are beginning to expose their efforts to the public, as to gain more support and professional participation. While 43.8% of the resources are mainly from a digital media; both internet and television is 16.3% whereas radio with 11.2% as the least source of knowledge to the public. It can be summarized that Malaysian public have average level of awareness on the conservation efforts done throughout the city of Kuala Lumpur. Perhaps those valuable efforts

should be more transparent and advertised to the public for their awareness as well as to gain more support and interest from every levels of the community.

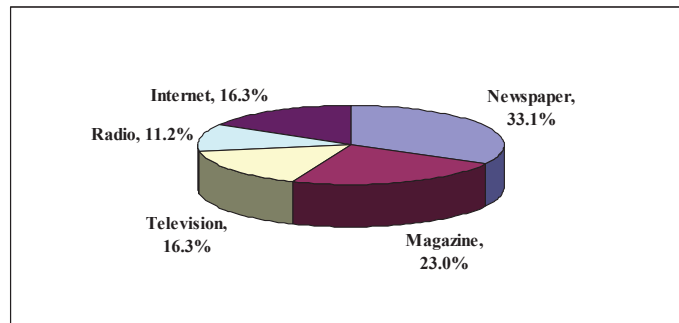


Fig. 2. Public's source of knowledge on conservation efforts in Kuala Lumpur; Source: Author

#### 4.4. Public's visits

The public were also inquire on their visits to any heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur for the past 12 months to make certain whether they have physically experience accessing a heritage building within the shortest period of time. It is rather important to identify any direct or indirect involvement of the public as a user to any heritage building besides requesting on their reasons of visiting. Out of the 178 total respondents, 74% stated that they have not been visiting any heritage building in Kuala Lumpur for the past 12 months. It is essential to revise the use or functions of those heritage buildings to the public as such condition may affect their accessibilities. Most respondents were physically in contact with those heritage buildings for the purpose of visiting only, and most recall their visits during their childhood years. The public do visit heritage buildings when there are special events held like festive celebrations and official launching. Such scenario notifies the lack of opportunities for the public to gain direct access to any heritage building in Kuala Lumpur.

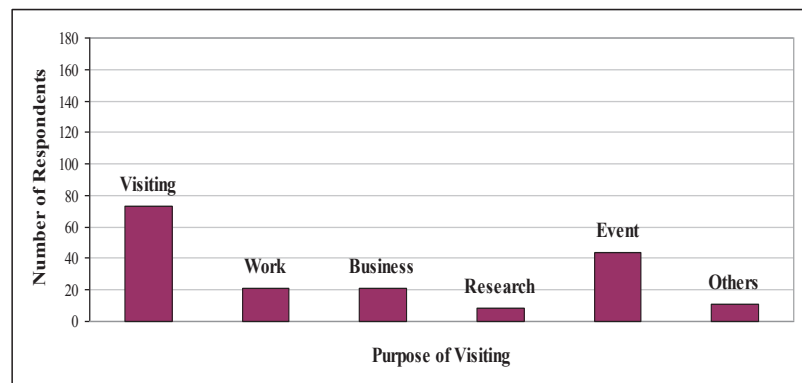
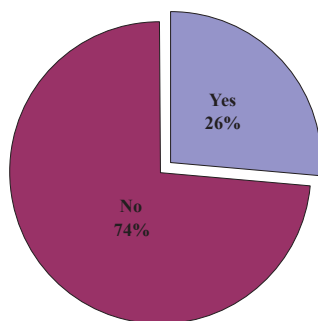


Fig. 3. (a) Public's visits to any heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur for the past 12 months. (b) Public's purpose of visiting any heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur; Source: Author



#### 4.5. Public's interest in participating conservation organization

The public were also asked on whether they have interest to participate in any conservation organization to protect those heritage buildings throughout Kuala Lumpur city. About 74.7% of the public do not believe themselves to be involved in any conservation efforts, as they are loaded with many other commitments. On the other hand, they are willing to spend a portion of their household income for the conservation of heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur. The public however are not aware of any collections made earlier or a proper channel for donations. Figure 4 illustrates 117 respondents who have not contributed any donation for any building conservation purposes. This is an important point to be considered in ensuring indirect public's involvement for the conservation of heritage buildings in Malaysia.

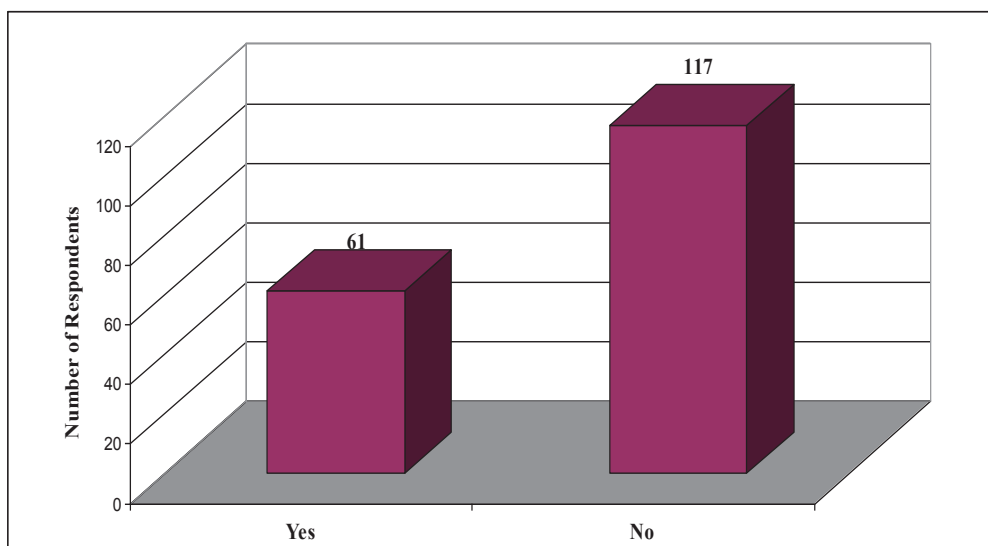


Fig. 4. Public's donation for building conservation purposes; Source: Author

#### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

As conclusion, this research has led to the result that, there are importances of conserving the heritage buildings in Kuala Lumpur to the Malaysian public. Besides functional as tourism landmark and attraction to the capital city of Malaysia, heritage buildings are efficient in protecting the scenic beauty of Kuala Lumpur. However, the lack resource of knowledge and exposure to the public on any conservation efforts throughout the country especially hot-spot city centre like Kuala Lumpur is to be look into. Public awareness and involvement should be seriously harnessed through promotions and educations nation wide. Continuous promotion should be held via mass media such as newspaper, television, radio, brochures as well as the internet to create more awareness among all level of society. Educational seminars and workshops on building conservation are encouraged especially among the younger generations with the participation and interest from both government and non-government organizations. The efficiency of heritage building use is nevertheless important to ensure a direct utilization by the



public. It is significant point to a high level of awareness from the public on saving that historical evidence in Kuala Lumpur.

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